

Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan

Draft Strategies, Goals, and Actions (as of 4/30/12)

Strategy I: Keep land in agricultural production by protecting farmland, helping a new generation to farm, and improving the viability of all farms in the County.

*All goals are for a ten year period, from 2012 to 2022.

Goal A: Retain 95% of the 149,356 acres in the county in agricultural production as reported by the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture.

Actions to protect farmland and stabilize the land base:

1. **Develop an Erie County purchase of development rights program.** As part of this planning process, farmland in the county was prioritized for protection based on criteria including soil quality, development pressure, and location in relation to other public natural resources and permanently protected land. A county program will use the farmland prioritization, along with a voluntary, pre-application process, to determine which farmers and landowners are interested in protecting their land. Review of the land prioritization and pre-applications will culminate in a ranking of potential projects. New York State (www.agriculture.ny.gov) and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) (<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/farmranch>) have had programs to supplement the local cost of purchasing development rights on farmland. New York's program has not funded any new projects since 2009. In order to institute a county program, a local funding source will be needed to match the federal or state program funding, or to fully fund the county program.
2. **Support the state-certified agricultural district program with right-to-farm provisions.** New York Agricultural Districts Law, Article 25AA (<http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/AP/agsservices/25-AA.pdf>) of the Agricultural and Markets Law, provides 'right-to-farm' protections for farms in state-certified, county-adopted agricultural districts. These include protection against unreasonably restrictive local ordinances, the ability to undertake sound (as determined by the NYS Commissioner of Agriculture) agricultural practices, agricultural data statements for certain land uses within 500 feet of a farm, and notice of

intent filings on proposed public projects that may impact farms.

3. **Collect agricultural assessment data by town in order to inform agricultural planning efforts.** The Erie County Department of Environment and Planning (DEP) administers the state agricultural districts program for the county, and staffs the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board (AFPB). Agricultural assessment data is collected by individual municipalities but not necessarily shared with the county DEP. Understanding exactly what land in the county is in active agricultural production is necessary for the DEP and AFPB to effectively plan for agriculture in the county.
4. **Assist towns that wish to adopt term and/or permanent easement programs.** Currently the towns of Orchard Park and Elma have term easement programs with permanent conservation easement options. These programs reduce the property tax assessment on a minimum acreage and place a deed restriction for a specified term on that land. Farmland is unavailable for development during the term. Because the towns legal authority to establish such a program was questioned, Orchard Park and Elma sought state authorizing legislation in order to proceed with the program. Determining the parameters of a term easement program, and requesting state authorization can be daunting tasks for a town. DEP assistance can facilitate the process. Providing support to towns that have permanently protected farmland is important as well. This includes the towns of Amherst, Marilla, Elma, and Clarence.

Goal B: Retain 95% of the 1215 farms in the county as reported by the USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture. (Note: The Census of Agriculture defines a farm as producing and selling \$1,000 of agricultural products in a year.)

Actions to help a next generation become established on new and existing farms through training programs, promotion, education, and incentives:

1. **Workforce development:**
 - a. **Encourage BOCES to include agricultural workforce training.** BOCES offers career training for high school students and workforce development for adults. Expanding these programs to include hands-on training for farm work will help to provide a local workforce for Erie County farms. <http://www.boces.org/wps/portal/BOCESofNYS>
<http://www.e1b.org/wps/portal/Erie1>
 - b. **Develop a community college agricultural training program for workforce development.** Niagara County

Community College has a horticulture degree program (<http://new.niagaracc.suny.edu/lsd/horticulture.html>) for students interested in careers with nurseries, landscapers, golf courses, or florists. Genesee Community College offers an exploratory agriculture course to help students better understand agriculture in the region http://www.genesee.edu/content/academics/programs/MathSci/Environ/AGR190_factsheet.pdf. And Monroe Community College has an Agriculture and Life Sciences Institute (<http://www.monroecc.edu/depts/Agriculture/>) designed to prepare students for farm and food production careers. Erie County can use these courses and programs as models to create a community college agriculture degree program that trains students for work on farms.

- c. **Develop a formal county apprenticeship and internship program.** Create a comprehensive program package that farms can use when offering apprenticeships and internships. Farms sometimes hire students or young adults who continue to work on the farm throughout their high school and college years. A small number of these students become permanent employees on a farm or begin to farm on their own. Generally, this has happened informally in Erie County, Erie County can facilitate these work arrangements by documenting and sharing opportunities for apprenticeships and internships on local farms.
- d. **Research the institution of a farm workforce development program that could benefit new immigrant populations and farms.** Diverse immigrant and refugee populations from around the world are located in Erie County. Many immigrants come to the U.S. with farm backgrounds and knowledge. Using these farming skills and helping them to secure jobs benefits the immigrants and local farmers. The New Farmer Development Program in New York City. <http://www.grownyc.org/greenmarket/nfdp> supports and trains immigrants to own their own farms.
- e. **Support all youth agriculture programs:** 4-H is part of Cornell Cooperative Extension (including programming at the Belle Center in Buffalo <http://www.thebellecenter.org/>) and provides hands-on learning opportunities for youth in a variety of areas including agriculture. <http://cceeriecounty.shutterfly.com/4-hyouthdevelopment> ; FFA is a high school and college agricultural career and leadership program <http://www.nysffa.org/>; and Agriculture in the Classroom is a curriculum based education program for primary and secondary students, that uses agricultural

lessons to teach required competencies
<http://www.nyaged.org/aitc/>.

2. Urban agriculture:

- a. **Support Buffalo's Green Code zoning update in order to expand urban farming opportunities.** The City of Buffalo is part way through a two year process to update its 60 year old zoning code to be 'place-based' with emphasis on enhancing the quality of life and character of the city. Urban farming is prevalent in many large U.S. cities, and has become rooted in Buffalo's neighborhoods as well. Zoning code that reflects the interests and needs of urban agriculture will help these farms to flourish – farms such as the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) <http://mass-ave.org/> , Queen City Farm <http://queencityfarm.blogspot.com/>, Community Action Organization Green Entrepreneurial Center <http://www.caoec.org/html/gec.html>, Wilson Street Farm <http://wilsonstreeturbanfarm.wordpress.com/>, and others.
- b. **Encourage a new or expanded agriculture program in a Buffalo city school, as well as in other Erie County schools.** McKinley High School in Buffalo <http://www.buffaloschools.org/McKinley.cfm?subpage=46912> offers a horticulture program for students and hosts a chapter of the Future Farmers of America (FFA). Supporting and enhancing this program to include training in other agricultural careers and urban farming can create new opportunities for city youth and may help to provide a trained workforce for county farms. This effort can be modeled after the agriculture program at John Bowne High School in New York City which includes an extensive internship component in the school program. http://www.johnbowne.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=65010&type=d.

3. New farmers:

- a. **Develop a property tax abatement program for new farmers.** Similar to a payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT), new farmers could receive an exemption from property taxes for a specified time period, for instance five years, on land that is used for agricultural production. Town IDAs could function as the primary program provider. The county would reimburse towns for the program cost. The state of Nebraska has a beginning farmer tax credit program for personal property used in agricultural production that operates in a similar manner. http://www.agr.state.ne.us/beg_farmer/index.html

- b. **Promote western New York as a place to farm.** Erie County will lead a western New York effort to promote the region to new farmers and to help transition farms that are at particular risk of being lost to development. Promotional efforts will focus on niche, value added, and direct market farm enterprises that operate on smaller acreages in urban-edge areas. Jefferson County developed a promotional program, *Come Farm With Us*, which eventually expanded to encompass 8 northern New York counties and led to the transfer of well over 65 farms in the North Country.
<http://www.comefarmwithus.org/>
- c. **Promote existing training programs that are targeted to small and beginning farmers.** Organizations that offer such programs include Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County <http://cceeriecounty.shutterfly.com/> Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York <http://www.nofany.org/>, New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group <http://www.nysawg.org/> , and others.

Goal C: Establish five new agricultural programs (from the list below or others) that can improve the viability of farms in Erie County.

Actions to improve farm viability and increase investment in agricultural economic development projects:

1. **Capital:**

- a. **Work with a local or regional economic development organization to become a certified Microenterprise Development Organization.**
www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_RMAP.html Seek USDA, Rural Development program funding to support creation of a rural microenterprise technical assistance program. Develop a microenterprise loan program meeting USDA, Rural Development program requirements.
- b. **Increase access to traditional capital sources for rural and agricultural businesses by providing:**
 - Credit enhancements such as linked deposits.
 - Assistance with loan packaging.
 - Financial assistance to small regional banks to encourage a greater level of loan syndication.
- c. **Provide a grant clearinghouse, access to professional grant writers, and access to competitively awarded cash match.** This program could be modeled on the Maryland Value Added Grant Program www.marbidco.org .

2. **Aggregation and Distribution:**

a. Research the feasibility of creating a food hub in the region for farm product aggregation and distribution with the following elements:

- Co-packing facilities.
- Public cold storage
- Branded, community marketing initiatives
- Partnerships with upstream and downstream industries
- Global GAP certification capability designed into the operating and management systems
- USDA inspected facilities
- Shared-use processing facilities with business support systems, e.g., business incubation services.

Best practice research on food hubs can be found at <http://wallacecenter.org/our-work/current-initiatives/food-hub-collaboration>

b. Identify a coordinating agency (Erie County IDA, Buffalo Niagara Partnership) to issue a request for proposals to provide aggregation and distribution services for local farmers and food processors seeking to develop external markets.

3. Research development of an innovation center for the western New York region (for new food product development and value-added). www.cdr.wisc.edu

- The center should be focused on key regional sectors such as dairy, livestock, and vegetables.
- Attract private sector participation and investment
- Seek affiliations with national and international research institutions with a proven record of success.

4. Establish a shovel-ready Agribusiness Park in the county to attract food and agricultural processing businesses. Processing facilities for raw agricultural products can create an added market for local farms.

5. Marketing:

- a. Develop a county program to help farmers market their agricultural products and to assist with identifying new market opportunities.** This program should focus on virtual services and include a more rigorous transaction based system than currently offered by Market Maker, for example similar to the Fresh Fork Market www.freshforkmarket.com.
- b. Develop a regional agricultural brand.** It can be difficult for consumers who want to purchase local agricultural products, to identify which products are actually produced in western New York. A regional brand provides a quick, visible indication of

where the product comes from. Niagara County has a 'Pick Niagara' logo for local farm produce:

<http://www.ccenigaracounty.org/PickNiagara.aspx>. And New York State has a state brand for agricultural products grown, and foods processed, in the state. <http://www.prideofny.com/>

c. **Incorporate agritourism into countywide tourism efforts.**

Hay rides, corn mazes, u-pick, and farm trails have popped up around the region, and are helping farmers to supplement traditional farm income and to keep farms in business.

Coordinating agritourism efforts and promotion allows farms to share costs, and can help market the county as place to visit.

Erie County agriculture is diverse and has something for everyone. The scenic beauty of farm country, and consumer interest in local farm products will draw tourists to the county's rural areas. The Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition partnered with the University of Buffalo Regional Institute to develop a farm market brochure after surveying area farmers http://www.regional-institute.buffalo.edu/Includes/UserDownloads/sowing_finalreport.pdf. The Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau recommends the Lake Erie and Niagara wine trails as 'things to do' when in the region.

<http://www.visitbuffaloniagara.com/things-to-do/vineyards-wine-trails/>.

Strategy II Inform the public, local leaders, and elected officials about the benefits that agriculture provides and support policy and legislative changes that will improve farm viability.

Goal A: Fifty percent of the towns in Erie County will document the importance of agriculture to the local community either in their comprehensive plan or through other local planning efforts.

Actions to educate local leaders and elected officials about the benefits that farms provide to local economies and to the quality of life of county residents:

1. **Erie County will calculate the value of agriculture to the local and regional economy as part of a complete economic analysis of agriculture and its multiplier effects.** Local officials need information on the many benefits that farms provide to communities, but in order to be fiscally responsive to residents concerns, economic information is particularly useful. A complete analysis of the local and regional agriculture economy can provide this needed information. It will also be useful for the county to share cost of community services studies that American Farmland Trust and others have done in many areas of the country. These

studies show that farms contribute more in property taxes than they use in services.

http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/38422/COCS_08-2010.pdf.

2. **Erie County Dept. of Environment and Planning will offer regular trainings for local leaders and volunteers about:**

- agricultural friendly zoning;
- the economic benefits of farms and buying local farm products;
- the value of agriculture to the local community including cost of community service studies;
- agricultural assessment requirements and enforcement,
- incorporating agriculture into comprehensive plans and, developing and implementing agricultural and farmland protection plans;
- use of plan maps, especially soils maps, for local planning purposes;
- assessing and coding farmland and easement protected land; and
- addressing water line restrictions, drainage, and other infrastructure concerns that impact farms.

In New York State, towns are responsible for land use decisions. Yet, agricultural resources are not defined by political boundaries and are often better served by regional planning. Erie County can provide training to municipal leaders and volunteers to assist them in making educated land use decisions that support agriculture and help farms remain in business.

3. **Periodically host farm tours for local officials and leaders.**

Many elected officials have never visited a working farm and doing so can be quite informative. In past years, Erie County hosted local leaders on tours of farms during the renewal period for a state-certified agricultural district. This was an ideal opportunity to engage local officials in planning for agriculture in their community. For 22 years, Genesee County has annually hosted a countywide bus tour of farms and agribusinesses for officials and leaders, the Local Decision Makers Tour.

http://www.co.genesee.ny.us/docs/planning/ag_tour_rsvp_form_2011.pdf

4. **Strategize regional planning and reinvestment in urban areas.**

Maintaining growth in areas that have infrastructure, such as water and sewer lines, rather than extending this infrastructure into rural areas, protects productive farmland. The Framework for Regional Growth encourages this for the Erie-Niagara County region. The DEP also has a county policy that limits sewer extensions outside of Framework for Regional Growth developed areas.

<http://www2.erie.gov/regionalframework/index.php?q=Framework>

[Plan](#). The Town of Marilla limits the extension of water main laterals and service connections to less than four inches in the town's agricultural zoning district. This limits large subdivision development in agricultural areas.

Genesee County developed a Smart Growth Plan in 2001

<http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/30475/Genesee-County-Smart-Growth-Plan.pdf> that limits county water system hook ups to Smart Growth Development Areas which encompass population centers - city, village, and hamlet areas. Limiting water hook ups and extensions outside of Development Areas was instituted to protect prime farmland and the productive farms in the county.

5. **Encourage towns to use Memorandums Understanding (MOUs)** to expand regional planning for agriculture, and to recognize that farms are land based businesses that are not always well served when defined by political boundaries. Towns in the county already use MOUs for specific multi-town planning purposes. For example the towns of Amherst and Clarence have an MOU for the shared Transit Road transportation corridor. The Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition is a group of 8 municipalities in the southern portion of the county who are working together to support agriculture. Formalizing that support to include planning for agriculture would be a natural next step. And in 2000, the towns of Brant, Evans, and North Collins developed a joint Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan to coordinate agricultural planning efforts.

Goal B: Twenty percent of food products purchased by county institutions will come from local and regional farmers.

Actions to support policies that will help farms to provide affordable, local food to county residents:

1. **Food Policies:**

- a. **Develop a county Food Policy Council that includes a formal role for the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board** so that farmland is recognized as a critical component of local food production, and farm and food issues are not decoupled. Food Policy Councils typically influence policies directly related to food issues. It is less typical that they address land policies as they relate to farms and food production. Erie County has an ideal opportunity to create a Food Policy Council that does both and includes representation from the county Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board. Missoula County, Montana established a food and agriculture coalition <http://www.missoulacfac.org/> to serve as an umbrella

organization for two committees addressing land use and agricultural viability, and food access and consumption issues.

- b. Work with the Food Policy Council to develop a local food procurement policy for county institutions.** Expanding local purchasing from area farmers can improve farm profitability while consumers receive a fresh product that is grown nearby. In 2009, Albany County passed the first local food procurement policy in the state.

[http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/37953/Buy_Local_Law_Albany_County_\(3\).pdf](http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/37953/Buy_Local_Law_Albany_County_(3).pdf)

- 2. Promote local food purchasing by schools.** Concern about the nutritional quality of food served in school lunches has been well publicized. Connecting schools with local farmers to improve food quality is a win-win for school children and farmers but is not necessarily an easy process. Providing resources to county school districts to guide efforts to work with farmers and procure local food can facilitate these partnerships. <http://www.farmtoschool.org/state-home.php?id=17>

- 3. Promote farmers markets in the city and county.**

Nationally, the number of farmers markets has quadrupled since 1994 and grew by 17% from 2010 to 2011. Farmers have benefited from an increase in direct market opportunities where they capture more of the retail dollar while consumers appreciate a local stop to purchase local farm products. Erie County has 16 farmers markets with additional markets opening each season, including some that are sponsored by companies to provide a convenient, healthy food shopping option for employees. A number of Erie County farmers markets offer entertainment, making them a destination as well as a place to purchase good food. Erie County can encourage the establishment of new farmers markets in underserved locations in the county so that residents have a source of fresh, local produce.

Goal C: Establish an annual county-wide, agricultural event.

Actions to educate and inform the public about farms and food production:

- 1. Celebrate Erie County farms with a county-wide agricultural event for the general public.** Annually from 1996 to 2003, the Erie County Family, Food, and Farm Tour bused up to 500 adults and children to area farms on a Saturday in September. This farm tour was sponsored by a collaboration of county agricultural organizations and was well supported by county farms. Every

Father's Day for 16 years, Saratoga County hosts a public event on a local farm. <http://www.saratogafarms.com/sundae2011page.html> Attendance is always over 1000 people. Erie County can hold a public event on an annual basis that will showcase what farms in the county have to offer.

2. **Work with the Erie County Agricultural Society to promote the Farm2Table school program.** <http://www.the-fairgrounds.com/farm2table> The Farm2Table program, sponsored by the Erie County Agricultural Society, and held at the Erie County Fairgrounds, is a free, hands-on educational field trip for 3rd and 4th graders. Students learn about agriculture to better understand how food comes from farms to their tables. Advertising and promoting the Farm2Table field trip to schools can help educate youth about local agriculture.
3. **Provide support for Erie County Farm Bureau's efforts to encourage Agriculture in the Classroom** curriculum use in Erie County schools. <http://www.nyaged.org/aic/> Erie County Farm Bureau also donates a book to area schools and reads in classrooms during Ag Literacy Week each March. http://www.ecfarm.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=1&Itemid=50

Goal D: Implement at least four new public policies, or support ongoing policies, that protect farmland and support the viability of farms in Erie County.

Actions to support partner agricultural organizations, such as Farm Bureau, American Farmland Trust, and others, with advocacy efforts that focus on:

1. **Increasing the penalty for early termination of agricultural assessment.** Current penalties often do not deter premature removal of farmland from an agricultural district when a landowner chooses to sell or develop the land. And, consistent enforcement of agricultural assessment requirements and penalties is also needed. <http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/AP/agsservices/25-AA.pdf>
2. **Regional planning, especially between Erie and Niagara Counties.** The Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth identifies opportunities for shared agricultural planning between the two counties. Formalizing shared agricultural planning and including other western New York counties will strengthen farmland protection and farm viability work throughout the region. Elements from the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan should be used in developing the Farmland Protection Policy component to the Framework for Regional Growth. This will be one of six policy specific components

prepared by Erie County as part of Phase 3 of the Framework for Regional Growth (2006) document.

<http://www2.erie.gov/regionalframework/index.php?q=FrameworkPlan>

3. **Identifying, drafting when appropriate, and advocating for county, state, and federal agricultural policy and legislative changes.**

Coordinate state and federal advocacy work with other counties in the region with shared agricultural interests. Engage state and federal elected officials to advocate as a western New York coalition for these changes.

4. **Adequate county funding for Cornell Cooperative Extension <http://cceeriecounty.shutterfly.com/>, and the Soil and Water Conservation District <http://www.ecswcd.org/>.** Receive regular updates about county agriculture programs and support these organizations and programs in the annual county budget process.

General Recommended Actions:

1. **At five year intervals, formally review progress in implementing the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan.** Evaluate progress based on the identified goals in each strategy and update goals as needed. Develop a new county Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan at the 10 year mark.
2. **Develop an interactive, web based application of the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan.** Post the Plan on the county website and incorporate links to examples and websites of interest. Maintain the site as a clearinghouse for agricultural information and post current items of interest for farmers and county residents.